

From The Field: Hollywood Mental Health Success Story

By Gabrielle Messineo, LCSW, PSW II, Hollywood MHC



From left to right: Gabrielle Messineo, LCSW; Xena V., client; Myeong Choi, MD.

One of the many inspiring clients at Hollywood Mental Health Center (HMHC), known as Xena V., has been experiencing psychotic symptoms continuously over the past 45 years. Xena has been a client of psychiatrist Myeong Choi, MD, at HMHC for almost twenty years, and therapist Gabrielle Messineo, LCSW, for about five.

In 1991, Xena decided to take her recovery into her own hands and began to develop a toolbox of healthy strategies to successfully manage her symptoms. Because of her determination and persistence, she now has her own apartment, socializes every day, has many friends, hosts holiday parties, enjoys time with her pets and creates art.

Xena thought her techniques might be beneficial to share and wrote them down. I invited her speak at a staff meeting. This was a major challenge, due to her symptoms

and fears. However, Xena was willing to work through it with her therapist, and attend a clinic staff meeting and speak to her experiences in front of dozens of people. She summarized her skills for us and eloquently answered many questions, because it meant a lot to her that we could potentially introduce these strategies to other clients and help them. She is proud of her accomplishments and can gain even more confidence from sharing her hard work with others.

Here are some of Xena's life-saving techniques:

1. Utilization of healthy self-talk, such as "these thoughts are not reality," and "I have a good life with friends who love me."
2. Practice of a "running commentary," which is similar to mindfulness or healthy distraction. It involves her noticing the details of her environment or a visualization of a happy memory.
3. Limit negative thoughts or focus on sources of depression to a half hour daily. Xena uses a timer and ends this exercise with positive statements about herself and her life before moving on to her next activity.
4. "Take life a half-hour at a time." If feeling overwhelmed, focus only on what is needed to do in the next thirty minutes.
5. Belief in, and reminding of, a "healthy core," which is separate from symptoms. An individual is not defined by their symptoms.
6. Give permission to be angry toward the symptoms, because they are separate from the person. Xena validates and normalizes this anger toward the symptoms.
7. Xena practices "warrior mode" in which she imagines that she is a warrior for mental health, against the symptoms that try to defeat her. She nurtures the strength and bravery within her.
8. Xena reviews a physical list of her skills daily.